

Native Women Playwrights: Transmitters, Healers, Transformers

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(Keynote address delivered to "A Celebration of Native Women Playwrights" Conference at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, March 20, 1999)

Bill Wortman has been kind enough to invite me to address you today because I have edited an anthology of contemporary Native American plays for Theatre Communications Group. *Seventh Generation: An Anthology of Native American Plays* is literally coming out as we meet. It offers in a single volume seven Native plays selected from a great number more. Each of the seven is an individually exceptional work of theater. Each was well received in an original production venue and traveled beyond that initial circle to become known to a wider audience of play-goers, and then to a publisher. It seems significant during this Celebration of Native Women Playwrights to mention that four of the seven plays selected by myself and by the editors of TCG for inclusion are plays written by women. And we are privileged at this conference to have these very playwrights among us: in alphabetical order, Diane Glancy, LeAnne Howe, Victoria Nalani Kneubal, and the Spiderwoman Theatre—Lisa Mayo, Gloria Miguel and Muriel Miguel.

It is important to me, a New Yorker of Italian, Irish and English heritage, to tell you how I became involved in this four-year labor of love. My interest in Native performance was kindled in the early 1970s by my dissertation advisor. Charles Gattnig was fascinated by that part of my Italian research which concerned *tapetti di segatura*. *Tapetti di segatura* are sawdust paintings created on the marble floors of churches in Sorrento and Amalfi, Italy in preparation for Holy Thursday of Easter Holy Week. Professor Gattnig's fascination with sawdust paintings was in great part the result of the parallel he perceived between them and the sand paintings created by Navajo Medicine Men in preparation for Chantways. In both rituals a meticulously drawn image is destroyed immediately upon use and a significant sense of healing is imparted. A year after the dissertation was completed, we returned to that parallel and published an article entitled, "The Route of Evanescence: Sand and Sawdust in Rituals of Transformation."¹ In the

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years that followed, as I pursued a specialization in Italian theater, there were two playwrights whose works I championed and continue to champion here in the States. The first was Eduardo De Filippo (1900-1984), the famous performer-playwright-director who brought the dialect theater of Naples into Italian mainstream theater and whose comedically developed themes consistently revealed the societal injustices suffered by poor and working class people. The second is the brilliant comic performer-playwright-director Dario Fo who received the 1997 Nobel Prize for Literature, and whose primary message is "beware institutional power." In Fo's plays, presidents and popes are adroitly relieved of prestige and power as ordinary people become aware of their own potential. Both playwrights employ an extraordinary blend of traditional and improvisational theater technique to achieve their purposes, a blend of the traditional and the improvisational not unlike what I have come to observe in the work of Native playwrights.

In the early 1990s, I was drawn to Native theater for another reason. When asked to introduce a course in Black and Hispanic Theatre at my home school, Baruch College, I argued instead for a course called Theatre of Color in the United States in order to better address the interests of Baruch's diverse 25,000 student population. My proposal was accepted, and that curriculum, then and now, includes African-American, Asian-American, Hispanic American and Native American plays. Soon the CUNY Ph.D. Program in Theatre, where I also teach, became interested. And it was in preparing to teach the graduate version of "Theatre of Color in the US" in 1993 that I began to search seriously for a body of Native American plays. That search led to my initiating another graduate seminar entitled "Native American Drama" in 1997. We were fortunate in having Lisa Mayo address that first seminar, and Muriel Miguel address the second.

There was a third reason behind this intense search. The Native plays I originally included on that first Theatre of Color reading list were Hanay Geiogamah's *Body Indian*, *Foghorn*, and *49*, published together in 1984 and Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters*, published in 1988 and performed in NYC with Spiderwoman Theater, the Colorado Sisters and the Thunderbird American Indian Dancers and Singers. Each offered such a unique and powerful theatrical experience that I became determined to learn as much about Native theater as possible. And so began the journey toward an anthology, toward a way of bringing to all of my students, whether undergraduate or graduate, a significant group of plays they had not encountered before.

A host of people helped me on this journey, in particular the creator and editor of the ground-breaking *Native Playwrights Newsletter*, Paul Rathbun, whose extraordinary generosity in sharing texts by Native playwrights was matched only by the ongoing support of Jim Cyrus of the American Indian Community House in New York City. Both faculty and students at the CUNY Grad Center were

consistently supportive, particularly Randell Merrifield who worked with Muriel Miguel on transcribing *Power Pipes*. The many, many Native playwrights with whom I eventually communicated through a variety of media were unfailingly interested, open, and enthusiastic about the project. Besides those whose plays are compiled in the anthology, it has been possible to discuss in the Introduction the exciting work of several others.

We come together in Ohio this week-end from many parts of the United States to participate in a Celebration of Native Women Playwrights. The title of our conference in itself suggests a strong agenda, and, as keynote speaker, I would like to suggest three significant keynotes of life delivered by Native playwrights, particularly women playwrights, that deserve our recognition and applause. I would like to celebrate Native women playwrights as transmitters, as healers, and as transformers. While my material today comes primarily from the women's plays collected in *Seventh Generation*, it is clear that additional material to support such a celebration may be drawn from the works of their male counterparts, Hanai Geiogamah, William Yellow Robe, and Drew Hayden Taylor, as well as from many other Native playwrights, both women and men.

When Lisa Mayo spoke to my grad students during Spring 1993 she agreed to our taping her lecture. I returned to her remarks recently and have found them both wise and appropriate for our conference. It was Lisa Mayo who first impressed upon me the concept of the Native woman playwright as transmitter of cultural history. Here is a passage from her discussion of how she and her sisters create theater pieces together.

We learned after we got closer to our real sources—the earth, and all of the elements, and our ancestors—we learned that we carry information in our bodies, in our minds, from ancestors who we know and who we don't know, and we have also learned how to call upon our ancestors to give us information This is not only for Indians, by the way, this is for everybody; the closer you are to who you really are, the more information you get.²

I asked Lisa at that point if she thought of herself as a transmitter of ideas and information, and this was her reply: "Well, I guess so. I receive and I send and I guess that's a transmitter."

In Spiderwoman's *Power Pipes*, published for the first time in *Sevent^h Generation*, the character Owl Messenger says,

I see the layers. I'm here to bring the messages from layer to layer. I go to the place where everyone speaks the same language. I blow the messages to all. Then I take my needle attached to a long sinew, and I begin to connect the layers, breathing the messages into the cosmos.³

Another character, Naomi Fast Tracks, says, "It's the rubbing. I reach out. I rub the heart. It's the rubbing."⁴

In her author's statement accompanying *Indian Radio Days* written with Roxy Gordon, LeAnne Howe puts it another way: "American Indian playwrights and writers tend to create stories from the experiences of our people. In turn, our work belongs to our ancestors, and the next seven generations of American Indians. I call this Indian process 'Tribalography.'"⁵ As scene upon scene of this "radio" play lampoons targeted dates from Native American history—1924, for example, the date when Indians became U. S. citizens, or 1973 when A. I. M. and the F. B. I. met up in Pine Ridge, South Dakota—"Tribalography" transmits both information and attitude.

A grandparent paired with a grandchild is a dialogic technique, utilized in many cultures to transmit invaluable, inter-generational information. Terry Gomez employs this technique most effectively in her play *Inter-Tribal*, published in 1996. After much conflict between them, a granddaughter finally understands and accepts the depth of her grandmother's love for her and the tribal values empowering that love. An unforgettable grandmother-granddaughter pair is featured in *Seventh Generation* in Diane Glancy's *The Woman Who Was a Red Deer Dressed for the Deer Dance*. As in *Inter-Tribal* there is much conflict between the two, yet the granddaughter, speaking of her grandmother, concludes, "I've learned she taught me more without speaking than she did with her words."⁶ Interwoven with human dialog, transmitter Glancy also offers information about the spirit world and about the mythological deer of the play's title.

Another play springs to mind when I contemplate women playwrights as transmitters. Monique Mojica's *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots*, first produced in 1990 and published in 1991, is surely a significant American history play, one that recalls and celebrates unsung heroines, courageous women who resisted the overwhelming consequences of European colonialism with their lives. Through *Emmalehua* and *Ola Na Iwi* among other plays, Victoria Nalani Kneubal has transmitted much cultural information about her people, the people of Hawaii and Samoa. In *The Story of Susanna*, published in *Seventh Generation*, she has begun with the Old Testament persona of Susanna and created a protagonist who becomes a universal icon, travelling through different historical periods in a manner that seems to transcend cultural boundaries, while simultaneously transmitting the essence of female victimization and survival of that victimization.

What of Native women playwrights as healers? Why celebrate healing at this conference? First, two of the women represented in *Seventh Generation* refer specifically to a playwright's role as healer. Lisa Mayo, in her CUNY lecture, discussed the difference between a spiritual person or medicine person in the Native tradition and a healer in the sense that she and her sisters, through their work in the theater are healers.⁷ Diane Glancy puts it another way: "I think," she explains in her author's statement in *Seventh Generation*, "writing exists, in part, for healing, not only in the writer, but also for the reader/hearer. For instance, in Navajo and Hopi sand paintings, the painter aligns the design in the sand to the hurt in the one needing healing, and the painting is destroyed and the ailment along with it. Thus, there is healing. Storying should do the same."⁸

Of course we can turn to the Greek concept of catharsis and the purging of pity and fear through witnessing tragedy in the theater, and consider such purging a form of healing. More appropriate, I believe, in a consideration of Native plays is philosopher Susanne Langer's pronouncement in her famous work, *Feeling and Form*; the comic rhythm, declared Langer, is the rhythm of survival.⁹ The major thrust of the great comic traditions in Western theater has been consistently toward social and political criticism: the Greek Aristophanes, the Roman Plautus, the Italian Commedia dell'arte troupe and their latter-day heir Moliere righted grievous societal wrongs in their plays through the venue of laughter—as do my 20th century Italian favorites Eduardo De Filippo and Dario Fo. And so it is also among Native writers that comedy so often points the way to correction and to healing. In a 1988 *Melus* interview, Hanai Geiogamah described audience reaction at La Mama when *Body Indian* received its first famous production in 1972 under the tutelage of Ellen Stewart. "I'm writing this *pronunciamento* on alcoholism and Indi'ns workin' each other over . . .," states Geiogamah,

So we got the play rehearsed—it wasn't comin' off as funny . . . , we all thought that we were doing a big tragedy So then we got it into La Mama. The place was just packed with Indi'ns. From the very thing when that lady gets up off the bed . . . , people just started langhing and laughing and laughing . . . , and I was standing with Ellen Stewart, scared for other reasons as well: 'They're not supposed to be laughing. It's not &sposed to be funny.' They kept laughing, then I cooled off and realized these laugh lines that were there, zinging. Then it got unfunny, toward the end it just stopped I wasn't sophisticated enough at the time to understand what comedy is, such a complex thing, fabulously complex. I realized that I had written a tragicomedy, and the comedy part was really comic.¹⁰

Geiogamah, like those masters of comedy Moliere and De Filippo and Fo, learned that by causing his audience to loosen up through laughter, he had also caused them to listen up and to really hear his tragic *pronunciamento* on alcoholism. The contemporary Italian film, *Life Is Beautiful*, starring Roberto Benigni, relies on precisely the same technique in dealing with the holocaust: we laugh at Benigni's extraordinary antics and thereby lower our guard, becoming all the more moved by his suffering. The same may be said of Native writer/performer Sherman Alexie's impressive film *Smoke Signals*, for it is essentially because of the laughter that the character Thomas generates (part clown, part prophet—a modern day Native spiritual person) that his friend Victor, together with us, the audience, is able to really hear about his father's life in a new way. New hearing brings understanding and forgiveness, and by forgiving his father for leaving him, Victor himself is healed.

To truly hear in the theater often proves the blessing that paves the way to healing in life situations. Muriel Miguel, in speaking at CUNY in Spring 1997 of her improvisational theater work with people of various ages on a reservation in Arizona, recalled individuals coming up to her following performances and telling her that they had just seen their own story acted out—healing had taken place.

Plays about Native women and by Native women overflow with the stuff of endurance, the stuff of survival, the stuff of comedy. Surely Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* celebrates the potential of laughter and fellowship to heal many ills, even the death of someone we love. The seven sisters make it to Toronto's biggest bingo game and the Bingo Master dances with Marie-Adele Starblanket, becoming Nanabush and leading her to the spirit world. Healing begins when, back on the Rez, Pelajia drops a handful of earth on Marie-Adele's grave and says to her, "I figure we gotta make the most of it while we're here. You certainly did. And I sure as hell am giving it one good try. For you. For me. For all of us. Promise. Really. See you when that big bird finally comes for me."¹¹

Diane Dowling, a CUNY graduate student enrolled in the 1997 Seminar on Native Drama, presented a paper at the August '97 ATHE conference in Chicago entitled "Jumping Out the Window: Images of Alcoholism in Native American Plays." She examined three plays by Native women: *Inter-Tribal* by Terry Gomez; *Sun, Moon and Feather* by Spider Woman Theater; and *Stick Horse* by Diane Glancy, and offered a convincing case for the potential healing brought about by each playwright's ability to address and dispell the stereotype of the "drunk Indian." "The playwrights," wrote Dowling, "balance the self-destructive impulse. In each play, one character is drunk: the others work hard to keep that person in the world. Family ties, Native traditions, contemporary struggles all become visible in relation to the character who wants to escape. . . ."¹² Dowling concluded that the ultimate goal of these playwrights is to nurture Native American survival.

Seventh Generation, Spider Woman's *Power Pipes* and LeAnne Howe's *Indian Radio Days* exemplify the power of laughter to heal—and to teach. I recall vividly seeing *Power Pipes* performed at the American Indian Community House in New York City in 1995 and knowing then that it had to be published. How else to cultivate the possibility that another group of women in some future time would bring to new audiences the combined sense of power, of laughter, of sisterhood, of solidarity that flowed from the cooperative creativity of the Spider Woman trio working with the Colorado Sisters, Hortensia and Elvira, and with Murielle Borst? *Power Pipes* offers theater students everywhere a late 20th century, Native American embodiment of 17th century Commedia dell'arte methodology in its weaving together of song and dance, ritual and story in a performance that brings laughter and correction.

Scene upon scene of LeAnne Howe's and Roxy Gordon's stereotypical "history" of Native Americans, presented as an "evolving bingo experience," evokes sardonic laughter. *Indian Radio Days* presents Indian Chiefs meeting Columbus, multiple wars, Tonto and the Lone Ranger, "Indian" advertisements, and Mr. President and the First Lady—most speaking their pieces against contrapuntal musical selections. The playwrights offer farce and melodrama that become their instruments for telling the tragic tale of their conquered peoples. At the same time they provide the means of laughing at oneself, that unfathomable cornerstone of health and healing.

Concerning the matter of women playwrights as healers, it is stating the obvious to say that women in every culture have been required, from infancy on, to master survival techniques of endurance and healing. Yet the obvious bears repeating. For within every group that is moving forward, away from oppression and toward equality and justice, there has been the concomitant need to reform inequities between men and women. And still now, in our time and in our society, it is the women playwrights of every ethnic group who appear most able to lead as healers. Practice, perhaps, makes perfect.

When a good Native play is written many healings occur. The Native American community is healed in some way. The American theater, long deprived of women's plays in general and of Native plays in particular, is healed to some degree. Indigenous peoples everywhere are supported. World theater becomes richer. Often the playwright and his or her professional associates—actors, directors, designers—are healed, if temporarily, by employment. And if the playwright is a woman, the history of womanhood grows in luster, and men and women everywhere are moved toward greater equity, greater healing.

There are many reasons for sounding a third keynote of life—a tone, a theme, a motif, of "transformation." One could argue that whenever we enter a sacred space of some kind, we entertain the possibility of transformation. For those of us who think of theater space as sacred space, we entertain the possibility of

transformation every time we choose to witness a performance. Rex Robbins, a professional actor for 40 years, and a friend, speaks of that moment in performance when he can sense the group mind of the audience changing. Another friend, when addressing a peace gathering following the ravages of Vietnam, told his audience of his conviction that people's hearts can, and often do, change. Father John Hinchey died 10 years ago, but his words remain a part of my information. In her author's statement in *Seventh Generation*, Victoria Nalani Kneubal writes,

I am a playwright because I believe the theatre provides the possibility of a communal experience which is at once both artistic and intensely human. It is a conduit into our everyday world through which mystery and magic may still enter. At the same time, theatre can serve as a powerful platform for examining the social and political issues of our time.¹³

Given the history of the United States, contemporary Native playwrights and, indeed, Native writers in general have no choice but to confront contemporary social and political issues. And mainstream America is best advised to listen carefully. In his book *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon*, Arnold Kraupat puts it bluntly:

We will never comprehend American civilization or culture (not to say American society) until we comprehend the European component of it in historical relation to the Afro-American and the Indian, and, increasingly, in relation to those other cultural Others whose Otherness is nonetheless deeply American.¹⁴

Such comprehension requires transformation. In recent years the study of Theater history, particularly American Theater history, has spawned interesting terminology to describe what has been going on since the 1960s. C. W. E. Bigsby has written about The Theatre of Commitment, Eric Hobsbawm about the Invention of Tradition, Sue Ellen Case about the Feminist Theatre, Richard Schechner about Environmental and Ritual Theatre. Native theater offers form and shape and example for many 20th century-isms of the theater while still retaining a clear identity of its own. And that identity is, thankfully, growing stronger by the day. Elizabeth Theobald, Director of Public Programs at the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center, puts it well in her Epilog to *Seventh Generation*:

Unique Native voices are coming out of places like Minneapolis, Toronto, New York, Santa Fe, Los Angeles, Honolulu, Oklahoma City, Juneau and Winnipeg. (And when I say Native, I'm covering a lot of territory, grasping at a way to give a cohesive name to Native Americans—Native Canadians, Hawaiians, Alaskan Native, Mexican Natives, Caribbean Natives—over five hundred Nations that call themselves by their own names, and are filled with talented individuals.)¹⁵

For many of us here today, it might be fair to say that theater is our "religion." To my mind, a good play offers the most tangible evidence the human race possesses of resurrection, of the word-made-flesh. A play, brought to life in performance, may prove a vehicle for transmission, a vehicle for healing, a vehicle for transformation. The wonder is that this magic vehicle, alive on stage today and tomorrow, possesses the power of re-birth, of being alive on stage again, 100 or 200 or 500 or 1000 years from now.

In her book, *The 13 Original Clan Mothers*, published in 1993, Jamie Sams writes that in the Native American Tradition, "to become a fully grown woman happens around the age of fifty-two."¹⁶ I found this to be welcome information. Those of us who are fully grown (elders perhaps?) understand that what we do we do with the hope and the faith that someone in the future will know better, understand better, live better because of our work (because of our experience). But those of us who are fully grown also understand that young people—whether our children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews, our students and colleagues—must learn for themselves. Surely one of the most viable means available of learning for yourself is by witnessing performance, particularly performance by living, breathing women and men, pre-celluloid, pre-digitized performance of the word-made-flesh.

The Native playwrights we celebrate here today are transmitters of the past, of "tribalography" as LeAnne describes it. You are healers of the present, as Lisa and Diane suggest. And, above all, you are transformers of the future. Your words, your scenes, your visions have the power of effecting change in the minds and hearts of those who witness your work. And that work has the magic power of coming to life again and again through young minds and young bodies and young voices—through the seventh generation. To be a playwright is a sacred calling.

The journeys of your plays, each different, yet each in some fashion similar to the others, become in themselves metaphors for that larger journey Indigenous Americans have undertaken from silence to voice in so many arenas of life in the United States during this century. With *Seventh Generation*, we open a new chapter of play publication. As you continue to commit your extraordinary experiences to the extraordinary communal fulcrum of performed theater and to

the textualizing of that theater, many, many anthologies of Native plays will follow.

Notes

1. Mimi Gisolfi D'Aponete and Charles Gattnig, "The Route of Evanescence: Sand and Sawdust in Rituals of Transformation," *Centerpoint* (Winter 1975-76): 17-28.
2. Lisa Mayo, lecture delivered to CUNY graduate students in "Theatre of Color in the United States" Seminar, Spring 1993.
3. *Seventh Generation: An Anthology of Native American Plays*, ed. Mimi Gisolfi D'Aponete (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1999) 159.
4. *Seventh Generation* 160.
5. 104.
6. 289.
7. Mayo lecture, see note 2 above.
8. *Seventh Generation* 272.
9. Suzanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953) 326-350.
10. Kenneth Lincoln, "MELUS Interview: Hanay Geiogamah," *MELUS* 16 .3 (Fall 1989-90) 72.
11. Tomson Highway, *The Rez Sisters* (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan: Fifth House Publishers, 1989) 105.
12. Diane Dowling, "Jumping Out the Window: Images of Alcoholism in Native American Plays" (Paper delivered at the ATHE August 1997 Conference in Chicago) 3.
13. SG293.
14. Arnold Kraupat, *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989) 234.
15. SG374.
16. Jamie Sams, *The 13 Original Clan Mothers* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994) 2.